The Dealer

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Kellen Dougherty was the best trichologist in Las Vegas. He ought to be, as he was certainly the most qualified. First a pre-med degree, then MD, then 3 years specializing in dermatology, before concentrating on trichology and the human scalp. People would come from Los Angeles and San Francisco to consult him. Kellen had discovered early, that when it comes to overcoming baldness people will go to great lengths.

We Jonah Javits and his girlfriend Gemma, came to his consulting rooms, he was a little surprised. He had only limited male pattern baldness. Kellen noted that Jonah had a triangular body shape, often called “pear shaped” with poorly developed shoulders and wider hips. He also exhibited patchy beard growth, but had good skin – no blemishes or scarring.

“What you are describing to me may not give you the look you want,” said Kellen. “For a more masculine pattern I do have to be so aggressive in lifting the forehead. That will raise the eyebrows. I can show you on the simulation. What you are asking for is more of a female hairline.”

“But that’s what we want,” blurted Gemma.

“Look, if you are considering transition to female, you should tell me,” Keller leaned back in his chair. “I have many transgendered patients. I have a role to play, but I am no bone surgeon for anything radical. Hair and skin is my game. And I should say that in your case that might be all you need. You are lucky that you do not have heavy features.”

Jonah was searching for an alternative explanation for what he was asking for, but Gemma had reduced the options for deceit. He said: “I am still uncertain about this, Doctor Dougherty. Maybe if I can pass successfully, I could consider life as a woman … a transwoman that is.” Jonah felt that he had the terminology correct. It seemed that there was no harm in agreeing with his assumption.

“Appearance is only half of it,” Kellen said. He knew from the experience of his other patients of this kind. “But I can do something with your scalp without cutting your longish hair. I can bring it forward here, and the sides up a little to close off. Early thinning on top I can cut out. I would strongly recommend anti-androgens to keep further balding away. I am registered to prescribe those.”

“Will it be noticeable?” asked Gemma, “The surgery I mean.”

“Short term I would suggest bangs and hair hanging on the sides to conceal suture marks, but long term, no,” Kellen replied.

“We could pay a little extra for invisibility,” said Jonah. He could hardly explain to the doctor that the casino required female dealers to wear their hair up, to avoid any place to hide cards or ear pieces. Gemma and he had already decided how the new Rochelle was to wear her hair, provided that the scalp surgery was a success.

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Only three days before, Jonah and Gemma had learned of the new employment policy that had been adopted by Jellicoe’s Casino. Jonah had been working on his plan for months, and Jellicoe’s was the best target by miles. It was a casino specializing in card games, and had a bank large enough to stand the losses that Jonah would engineer as the “pinch dealer”.

He had the player lined up who would face him as dealer. A German guy, completely unknown in Vegas. Hendrick Stehmann - a truly mathematical mind. Not a counter, somebody new to gambling. A total outsider, unknown in all casino circles. But somebody who could assess the odds and play them without any prompt. And unemotional. The perfect player.

Any good pit boss could recognize a counter once they had won a few bets. But you cannot throw every winner out the door. That was where the pinch dealer came in. He (or she) would be called upon the bring the game back to the house - to make sure that the winner lost before he went too far. If Jonah was in that seat, he could carefully throw the game to Hendrick. It would look like chance, or perhaps just errors by the dealer. There was no visible crime.

But the new policy was that Jellicoe’s were only hiring women dealers. The most frustrating thing was that Noah knew that their current pinch dealer was male. Kellen knew that he was better than this guy, but he could not displace him unless he was on the staff, and now he could not get on the staff.

Could Gemma do it? She had been a hostess and a croupier, but she was not up to the game. It was her who said: “There would be more chance of you passing yourself off as female than me passing myself off as a blackjack player.”

If he had not been so worried, he might have laughed. But instead he looked at her to see whether she was serious. And she was looking at him carefully – assessing how he would look with a little makeup on.

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They had time. Time for the stiches in his head to be pulled and the marks to heal. Time to learn the role of a woman.

It quickly became apparent that teaching Gemma how to deal might have been the better option, but Jonah learned that much of feminine behavior is in the hands. Other gestures such as checking hair and makeup, seemed to come naturally when you have hair and wear makeup. And walking in heels is a skill that even women must learn.

It was not long before “Rochelle” was able to take her first outing. She and Gemma dressed up and went down to the Strip. They were hit on in a bar at the Venetian. Rochelle had time to exercise her new voice, first to politely refuse, and then to rebuff with ferocity, but all the while keeping the high tone that she had been working so hard on.

The name “Rochelle” was on the ID. The photo was faded and showed a young girl with mousy hair and glasses – not much like the new Rochelle, but it could be her. It had belonged to a friend of Gemma’s who had killed herself years before, and Gemma had kept it to remind her how valuable life is. Now it was put to use.

It was the ID that was used when Rochelle applied for the position at Jellicoe’s Casino. If they investigated Rochelle’s origins in Sandusky, Ohio, they would find no record that she was dead. It was a Jane Doe that had been pulled from East River, New York City. The ID was with Rochelle’s purse with other papers, and a note that she would prefer to just disappear. Gemma respected that request and never told anyone.

As far as any employer was concerned, Rochelle was alive, and her record was clean.

The new Rochelle was nervous only because she was not really a she. She was careful with her body

moisturized. Her hair was down, with extensions underneath, and her own long hair across her forehead to conceal the last signs of the surgery. Her makeup had been done by Gemma with some care – it was day makeup but showed off Rochelle’s hazel eyes to perfection.

The pit boss Gary Humboldt sat in on the interview. He liked what he saw. Her fingers were nimble. Her counting was good. Her knowledge of the games of chance was well above average, and she had a magnificent pair of breasts, and on display too.

That had been the hardest thing for Jonah to agree to, but it was Rochelle who clearly noticed their impact. When it came to selection criteria those breasts were probably criteria 1 and 2, with skill coming a distant 3rd. She got the job with an effective immediate start – a 3-day induction process.

On the floor she proved popular. She was friendly but professional. She was attractive and seemed to be becoming more so with each passing day.

Gemma noticed that too. There were times when she almost felt like a lesbian, particular when Jonah neglected to revert when they were in private and she found herself in an intimate discussion with another woman. It was unnerving.

Promotion to the key position of pinch dealer was slower than both of them had imagined. Rochelle’s skills were on display, but there were other dealers more senior, and that counted for something with Gary, despite his insistence on efficiency.

That meant more waiting – more time as Rochelle. But it was becoming less of a burden for Jonah Javits, as Rochelle’s life took over his.

But for Gemma it was hard. With what they had called “C-Day” approaching, they had decided that Rochelle would need to move out of the apartment they rented to ensure distance. Even though they had not been intimate for some time, Gemma still miss her man, even though he had effectively been absent for months.

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Rochelle was annoyed, as she got off the airplane in Albuquerque. Obviously, Hendrick needed to be filled in on the change, but quite why he needed a meeting was unclear. Gemma had sent him a photo of Rochelle, and that should have been enough for him to recognize her as the pinch dealer, now that she had been confirmed in that position. But no – suddenly he wanted a meeting. That would need to be out of town, and preferably out of state. There could be no chance that a connection could be made between the dealer and the player.

Rochelle saw him from a distance, sitting at the Airport Starbucks as arranged, playing on his phone. Almost instinctively she paused at the cosmetics store to check her makeup. She had only been doing this for three months now, much longer than planned, but somehow it seemed only natural.

She checked her hair too. She had ditched the extensions and the wiglet for when her hair was up. Her hair seemed to have responded to the drugs that Dr Dougherty had prescribed, and the scalp treatments and conditioning, just as he said they would. Kellen Dougherty really was the best trichologist in Las Vegas. The side effects would need to be carried for now – appearances were everything. The softening of muscle and skin were initially disturbing, but had become convenient as she lived as Rochelle.

But strangely, there, on her own, without being dressed as a casino employee for their plot, and wearing just light makeup and casual clothes, she felt exposed.

She looked around before she took a seat at the table.

He looked excited to see her. “It is really you”, he said.

“What’s this about?” Rochelle said impatiently. “This is not what we agreed. No meetings. Ever. Least of all when we are so close to “C-Day”. Why do you need to see me? Gemma perhaps, but not me. I am the dealer.”

“I need to run through it with you.” Hendrick was smiling, in a way that belied his intelligence. “I have a room in the airport hotel, just off Arrivals. And I have cards too.”

“Well, I’m here now, so we can run through a few hands, in private. I know that it is unlikely, but there cannot be any record of us being seen together. You need to give me the room number and get another key and pass it to me secretly. Be aware of any cameras. We cannot be seen together.”

Hendrick seemed thrilled by the subterfuge. Or was he just fascinated by Rochelle. He nodded.

“My wife was a woman just like you,” he said, dreamily.

“I don’t think so,” said Rochelle. “You know the facts, Hendrick. A woman like me is not really a woman at all.”

“Exactly,” he said. Was that a leer? Rochelle felt uncomfortable.

He left before her, and had another key made at hotel reception. He put it in a magazine and dropped it on the coffee table in front of the relocated Rochelle. She waited almost an hour before going up to his room.

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The phone rang. Gemma swiped to answer. It was Jonah. Or more appropriate to say, it was Rochelle. That was the voice she heard: “I need to stay over with Hendrick. He just needs to run through some things.”

“This is dangerous,” she said. “You should never have seen him until this weekend. Any contact discovered will destroy everything.”

“Not having Henny onboard will destroy everything,” Rochelle said.

“Henny?” Gemma was puzzled.

“He is everything in this plan,” said Rochelle. “You know it.” Then she whispered: “I have to do whatever I can, to keep him onside.”

What was the problem? But the plan was everything. Gemma had spent the last 24 hours confirming all of the bank accounts that would be nominated for payment. International banking rules had become so complicated …

“I’ll be back after lunch tomorrow,” said Rochelle. My shift starts at 5:00.”

“We are very close, Honey.” Gemma wanted to hear Jonah reassure her.

“I know,” said Rochelle. Somehow the man that she cared for did not seem to be behind that voice. She had found it hard to hear her man no longer speak like one, but it was not that. Now Rochelle sounded distant. Cold.

“I will see you tomorrow then.”

Rochelle hung up the phone.

“Come back to bed, Liebchen,” said Henny.

Rochelle told herself that she was ready to do anything to keep this caper on track. Hadn’t she just proved that? Had she just done more than could be expected of anyone to keep on side with the person who was so vital to the plan?

And yet his smile made her smile. When his suit and tie and pressed shirt were off, his body was tanned and athletic. Somehow that made it easier, given that her body was nothing like that. It was pale, and soft and hairless – a woman’s body save for that little anomaly. It was just the body that Henny wanted to have curl up beside him.

“I’m coming, Henny,” she said, playfully.

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“We’ve got a problem, Boss,” said Manny Garcia, Gary Humboldt’s right-hand man. “He staying at the hotel. Hendrick Josef Stehmann. He’s a German diplomat.”

“Fuck,” said Gary. “We can’t pull him off the table and cause a diplomatic incident. You have tried all the usual stuff, I suppose. “The you’ve-won-a-prize-as-our-7-millionth-customer” trick, or whatever?”

“We’ve tried everything to pull him off,” Manny sighed.

“Get Rochelle onto this table,” Gary snapped. “As quick as you can.”

“You think your girlfriend can do the job?” Manny sniggered.

“She’s not my girlfriend, worst luck. But she knows what she is doing. Tell her to use or her skills and all her charms. This guy has to be put off his game. He has to start losing.”

It was the moment Rochelle was waiting for. As she passed Gary, his hand his hard hand ran over her soft arm. He said: “Put an end to this winning streak, Baby, and I’ll take you to that Michelin restaurant like I promised.”

She smiled and watched it have its effect on him. She said: “I’ll do my best.”

Gary waited at the screen until Rochelle took her seat. He liked to watch her at work, and he found it easier to look at her on video. When he was in her presence he found himself getting overly excited. It was not behavior that he found acceptable in his staff, so it was unforgivable in himself. The offer of a date was strictly contrary to a policy he strictly enforced. Why let it slide for her? She was not the most beautiful employee in the casino. Jellicoe’s hired plenty of beautiful girls, but there was something about Rochelle – a confidence verging on male swagger. It turned him on.

But there was a disturbance in another gaming room. His attention was required. In accordance with the plan he had become a part of, Gemma was to distract him while Rochelle helped Henny win a fortune.

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“I’m sorry,” Rochelle said. The tears were genuine. The look on Gary’s face had been enough. She had come to admire him … to like him … a lot. His look of disappointment had been enough to have her burst into tears. She could celebrate success later, but for now she felt the horror of the moment with everybody else a Jellicoe’s.

“It’s OK Rochelle,” Gary reassured her. But it definitely was not. It was a long way from Ok.

“The run of the cards, Gary. I may have made some bad calls, but I followed the same rules that we all work with. Stick with the probabilities. I tried,” she sobbed.

“Was there anybody signalling to him?” He had to ask, but she would not have seen it. He had been called away to deal with that crazy woman, but Manny was there. Between them they would go through all the footage looking for an accomplice. But maybe he was a counter? A new one, unknown to casinos in the loop? Or maybe it just was luck? It can happen – right?

“I know that it is nothing to do with you, Rochelle, but we do have a protocol. You need to stay in the hotel tonight. No contract with anybody but me. Until we check a few things and absolve you of any responsibility. Ok?”

“Sure,” said Rochelle. It was expected. “Just you?” She needed to check.

“Just me, he said. “Maybe I’ll bring that Michelin star meal to your room.”

She forced a smile and he smiled back, equally forced. Jellicoe’s had taken a hit tonight, and a big one. The German had entered as an underpaid diplomat and left as a multi-millionaire.

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She opened the door, and let him push the room service trolley inside.

“It’s not Michelin star,” said Gary. “But it’s a top line meal from the best restaurant in the hotel and a bottle of great Bordeaux wine.”

‘I would think that my employer would be ready to feed me at all,” said Rochelle. She was wearing a bathrobe. Underneath there was a gossamer thin baby doll nightie and a pair of tiny lace panties. To achieve this Rochelle had spent two hours since she got out of the bath with tape and surgical glue, fashioning what looked like female genitalia from her tiny penis and largely empty scrotum. Just in case.

“I paid for it,” said Gary. “The owners are insisting on a full enquiry. You may have to stay a bit longer, so at least we can enjoy this.”

He flourished the expensive looking bottle and reached for the cork screw.

“I’ll go mad if I can’t get out of here soon,” said Rochelle. “I have been watching TV for 3 solid days. I must have painted my toenails 50 times, fingers too.” She showed them off. She was getting very good at it. You like doing what you are good at.

“They look good. And I like the curls too.”

“I’m getting good at that too,” grinned Rochelle. “Thank you for the curling stuff. That’s what I do all day. Watch TV, take long baths and make myself pretty.” She checked herself in the mirror, running her fingers through the curls that danced around her head.

Gary pulled her around and kissed her, with passion. It was not as if she knew what to do, or even thought about it. Her hands were on the back of his neck, pulling his tongue into her mouth. His hands were on her breasts, now made so real by the hormones that the gel inserts were too deep to detect. She sighed excitedly.

They parted for a moment so that he could look at her. The hair, the made-up eyes, the open robe, the breasts, the panties through which he could see the delicate mound topped with pubic hair and beneath that …, she closed the robe.

“I can’t keep my hands off you, Rochelle,” he said.

“After the enquiry,” she said. “Call it your incentive to get it done.”

“I had hoped to stay the night with you tonight,” he said.

“You can,” she said. “I fact, I would love you to sleep with me, I really would. But nothing indecent. Do you understand?”

“I can live with that,” he said. He focused his attention back on the bottle. “After we have eaten and drunk this and done a bit more kissing.”

“That sounds good,” she said. “All of the above.”

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Rochelle used a payphone to call Gemma. The enquiry had cleared her, but she had resigned. Still she was concerned that she might be under surveillance from somebody in the pay of Jellicoe’s Casino.

It would not be Gary Humboldt. He pointed out that as she was no longer an employee, he could date her whenever he liked, and whenever was exactly what he liked.

Gary had told her on that last night that he was not sure whether she had any part in what happened and he did not care. “Jellicoe’s was ripe to be taken,” he had told her. “And it can be taken again and again. If it was nothing to do with you then that’s good, but if it were otherwise, I would not care. I only want to be with you.”

The words had thrilled Rochelle, more than she could understand. Things were getting complicated.

“Hendrick has not paid as we agreed,” Gemma said. “There has been no money paid into the BVI joint account for us. Just split 3 ways into the Swiss, German and Panamanian accounts in each of our names individually. What is he playing at?”

“How would I now. I’ve been out of the loop remember?”

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| “He said that you would now. Something about “changes in partners”. What is he talking about?”  Gemma was getting angry. There was a time when she might have found that endearing. When she was Noah. They had been happy then, and might be again.  But things were getting complicated. The money was in the Bank and there was a decision to be made.  What should she do?  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2019 | Image result for lady dealer casino |